

Department of Veterans Affairs

§ 1.554

§ 1.554 Requirements for making requests.

(a) *Requests by letter and facsimile (fax).* The FOIA request must be in writing. VA accepts facsimiles (faxes) as written FOIA requests. If the request concerns documents involving a personal privacy interest or documents protected by another confidentiality statute, the request must contain an image of the requester's handwritten signature. To make a request for VA records, write directly to the FOIA Officer for the VA component that maintains the records. If requesting records from a particular medical facility or regional office, for example, the request should be sent to the FOIA Office at the address listed for that component. If requesting records from a component within VA's Central Office, the request should be sent to the Central Office address of the FOIA Office listed for that component. A list of FOIA contacts is available on the Internet. A legible return address must be included with the FOIA request; the requester may wish to include other contact information as well, such as a telephone number and electronic mail (e-mail) address. If the requester is not sure where to send the request, he or she should seek assistance from the FOIA Contact for the office believed to manage the programs whose records are being requested or send the request to the Director, FOIA Service (005R1C), 810 Vermont Avenue, NW., Washington, DC 20420, who will refer it for action to the FOIA contact at the appropriate component. For the quickest possible handling, the request letter and the envelope of any FOIA request should be marked "Freedom of Information Act Request." The requester may find it helpful to refer to VA's FOIA home page on the Internet when making the request; available reference material includes VA's FOIA Reference Guide and the text of the FOIA. See § 1.552(a) for the pertinent Internet address.

(b) *Requests by e-mail.* VA will accept an e-mail request. If the request concerns documents protected by another confidentiality statute, the e-mail transmission must contain an image of the requester's handwritten signature, such as an attachment that shows the requester's handwritten signature. In

order to assure prompt processing, e-mail FOIA requests must be sent to official VA FOIA mailboxes established for the purpose of receiving FOIA requests. An e-mail FOIA request that is sent to an individual VA employee's mailbox, or to any other entity, will not be considered a perfected FOIA request. Mailbox addresses designated to receive e-mail FOIA requests are available on VA's FOIA home page. See § 1.552(a) for the pertinent Internet address.

(c) *Making a request for another individual's records.* If the requester is making a request for records about another individual, it will be helpful under certain circumstances to provide proof that the requester is authorized to obtain the records, such as a legally sufficient prior written authorization for the release of information signed by that individual, proof that the individual is deceased (*e.g.*, a copy of a death certificate), or proof that the requester is the authorized representative of the individual or the individual's estate. This information will assist in determining whether and to what degree the records may be released.

(d) *Description of records sought.* (1) The requester must describe the records sought in enough detail to allow VA personnel to locate them with a reasonable amount of effort. To the extent possible, the requester should include specific information about each record sought, such as the date, title or name, author, recipient, and subject matter of the document. Generally, the more information the requester provides about the record sought, the more likely VA personnel will be able to locate any responsive records. Wide-ranging requests that lack specificity, or contain descriptions of very general subject matters, with no description of specific records, may be considered "not reasonably described" and thus not subject to further processing.

(2) Requests for voluminous amounts of records may be placed in a complex track of a multitrack processing system pursuant to § 1.556(b); such requests also may meet the criteria for "unusual circumstances," which are processed in accordance with § 1.556(c)

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and may require more than twenty (20) business days to process despite the agency's exercise of due diligence.

(3) If the FOIA Officer determines that the request does not reasonably describe the records sought, the FOIA Officer will tell the requester why the request is insufficient. The FOIA Officer will also provide an opportunity to discuss the request by documented telephonic communication or written correspondence in order to modify it to meet the requirements of this section.

(4) The time limit for VA to process the FOIA request will not start until the FOIA Officer determines that the requester has reasonably described the records sought in the FOIA request. If the FOIA Officer seeks additional clarification regarding the request and does not receive the requester's written response within thirty (30) calendar days of the date of its communication with the requester, he or she will conclude that the requester is no longer interested in pursuing the request and will close VA's files on the request.

(e) *Agreement to pay fees.* The time limit for processing the request will be tolled while any fee issue is unresolved. If the FOIA Officer anticipates that the fees for processing the request will exceed the amount that the requester has stated that he or she is willing to pay or will amount to more than \$25.00 or the amount set by OMB fee guidelines, whichever is higher, the FOIA Officer will notify the requester. In such cases, the FOIA Officer may require the requester to agree in writing to pay the estimated fee. In addition, if the estimated fee amount exceeds \$250.00 or the requester previously has failed to pay a FOIA fee in a timely manner, the FOIA Officer may require the requester to pay the FOIA fee in advance, before beginning to process the FOIA request. If the FOIA Officer does not receive a written response within ten (10) business days of the date of the FOIA Officer's communication with the requester, the FOIA Officer will conclude that the requester is no longer interested in pursuing the request and will close the request. If the requester seeks a fee waiver under § 1.561, he or she nonetheless may state a willingness to pay a fee up to an identified amount in the event that the fee waiver is denied;

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this will allow the component to process the requester's FOIA request while considering the fee waiver request. If the requester is required to pay a fee in advance, and pays the fee, and if VA later determines that the requester overpaid or is entitled to a full or partial fee waiver, a refund will be made. (For more information on the collection of fees under the FOIA, see § 1.561.)

(f) The requester must meet all of the requirements of this section in order for the request to be perfected.

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§ 1.555 Responsibility for responding to requests.

(a) *General.* Except as stated in paragraphs (c) and (d) of this section, the FOIA Officer of the component that first receives a request for records is responsible for either processing the request or referring it to the designated FOIA Officer for the appropriate component. Offices that are within the component responsible for processing the FOIA request shall provide the component FOIA Officer all documents responsive to the request that are in their possession as of the date the search for responsive records begins.

(b) *Authority to grant or deny requests.* Each component shall designate a FOIA Officer who is responsible for making determinations pursuant to the FOIA.

(c) *Consultations and referrals.* When a component FOIA Officer determines that the component maintains responsive records that either originated with another component or agency, or which contain information provided by, or of substantial interest to, another component or agency, then the FOIA Officer shall either:

(1) Respond to the request, after consulting with the component or the agency that originated or has a substantial interest in the records involved; or

(2) Refer the responsibility for responding to the request or portion of the request to the component best able to determine whether to disclose the relevant records, or to the agency that created or initially acquired the record as long as that agency is subject to the FOIA. Ordinarily, the component or